

Examiners' Report/
Principal Moderator Feedback

January 2013

GCE English Literature (6ET02/01)
Explorations in Drama

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General Overview

This was the ninth series of the unit. Most of the entry consisted of a small number of candidates from centres, although there were a few centres with a full entry and some excellent folders. Moderators found several errors in administration, unfortunately. Quite a number of centres failed to submit the top and bottom candidates in their samples and there were also a number of mistakes in the addition of marks by centres. Some centres still do not insist on a bibliography, many candidates do not provide a cumulative word count, and a number of centres allowed their candidates to submit work of around 3000 words. One moderator commented: "As a general rule, if the administration was tight, the folders were fine: not always, of course, but it did seem to be a fair guide".

Annotation on candidates' work was helpful, on the whole, with evidence of cross-marking even in entries of a small number of candidates. However, there are still centres where the comments were very limited or non-existent, with perhaps some assessment objective identification then the totals for each objective at the end of a piece. Some centres photocopied the assessment criteria for the Explorative Study and the Creative Critical Response, and highlighted a band, or wrote in a mark which was not too helpful when it was unrelated to the actual work. Most useful was the appraisal of strengths and weaknesses which did specifically indicate why the marks had been chosen. A very small number of centres did not provide separate marks for the different assessment objectives in both pieces.

Explorative Study

Tasks set for the Explorative Study were variable. These do still serve to help or hinder the candidates significantly, which is partly to do with the way that candidates can then go on to link their texts (and thereby fulfil the requirements of Assessment Objective 3): a character-based title means that the texts will almost inevitably be linked by a series of character and narrative connections.

The wording of some tasks made it hard for the candidates to access all the assessment objectives; sometimes the task was so broad as also to be difficult to tackle: one centre asked its candidates to write about all the female characters in the two texts, and they were ones with three women in each, so they in effect wrote six character studies. On the other hand, a task that was more specific and based on relationships could work well: for example, contrasting father/daughter relationships in *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Tempest*. A step further took this to an examination of power imbalance in relationships which is more conceptualised and still has lots for a candidate to get to grips with. An excellent task was one on the importance of trade in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Doctor Faustus*, as the idea was explored in literal terms, and also metaphorically with a strong focus on language. The concept of what is lost, or lost and gained, in the two chosen plays also worked well: this was applied to *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Tempest* but obviously this idea could be very effective with other plays.

Centres might like to think about the types of critical material that they provide for their students. Moderators have sometimes found that the range of critical works – particularly on Shakespeare plays – is very narrow. One commented thus:

A small number of centres made sole use of A C Bradley as 'another reader.' This simply reinforced the character study element and was a hindrance rather than a help, restricting the scope of the discussion. It is much better to have a range of critical reading, covering different approaches. Why not investigate other ideas about tragedy or tragic heroes? Why not look at more modern ideas, and see that hamartia is generally now translated as an error, or misjudgement, not a character flaw? Shakespeare's tragedies don't conform to Greek ideas in that they have sub-plots, they mingle comedy with tragedy and so on? It might be more fruitful to read Oedipus and see how different it is from Shakespeare's tragedies in construction, mood, language etc.

It is certainly true of this series and of previous series that some candidates struggle to apply Aristotle's precepts in their Explorative Studies. Candidates often mix up the terms and grapple with the concepts and the contexts. They attempt to apply the 'rules' to plays in other genres and to assess female characters as tragic heroes. Yet, with other tasks and without this Aristotelian distortion, they might well have been able to interpret the texts freshly and thoughtfully. Instead of using critics to help them form their own readings and explorations of the texts, they are allowing the critic to form a barrier between them and the text. The whole 'tragic hero' idea almost invariably leads to character and narrative based studies. It would be much more productive to have explored, say, Othello's situation as an outsider, or the concept of masculinity in *Macbeth*, or the significance of the military in both plays, rather than whether or not they match criteria from 2000 years before the plays were written.

Creative Critical Response

There were some excellent tasks set for the Creative Critical Response. Moderators enjoyed the imaginative use of e-mails and blogs, for example. The task of writing a review of a production for the TES, suggesting whether it would be useful for teachers to take their students seemed a very good idea as it required candidates to display their ability to put themselves in another's place. There were lots of speeches from directors, diary entries from actors and some scripted interviews and discussions. There were, however, still some 'reviews' with no context and no stated audience. It is very hard to write to persuade when there is no clear intended reader. A small number were much too long, as much as 1000 words occasionally. This meant they lacked the sharpness and punchiness they needed. A few read like shorter Explorative Studies. It did seem a pity, and not very creative, when every candidate responded to the same task. Centres should bear in mind both parts - the creative and the critical - and not let one part be too dominant. Candidates also need to keep in mind the requirement for contexts and interpretations. As tasks that did not work too well, besides the reviews, there were several pitches for modern Shakespeare TV

versions and, though candidates often tried to write in a suitable voice and register, these did tend to lapse into narrative accounts, with Assessment Objective 4 sidelined and even ignored.

Moderators' comments on the Assessment Objectives

AO1

There were surprising lapses here, with problems embedding quotations, inaccurate terminology and large numbers of candidates who did not distinguish between *Hamlet* and Hamlet. Essays were not always effectively organised, but this was often the fault of the title which made it difficult to shape an overarching argument, especially if it depended on accounts of characters.

AO2

Some centre markers continue to write AO2 in the margin when the candidate has merely quoted from the play. The best answers integrated textual analysis throughout the essay - though some obviously had their 'language paragraph'. Some candidates more or less ignored the writer's techniques. It helps to address structure if candidates think in terms of the ways that plots, settings, climaxes, resolutions and so on work and have an impact on an audience. It is even better if candidates are able to link texts in this way, and there was some evidence of this.

AO3

This is the dominant assessment objective so it was surprising to see that some centres did not pay attention to both aspects of it, awarding top band marks to essays where the plays were treated almost separately, or where there was no reference to other readers. Some candidates who struggled a bit with incorporating critical comments were more at ease with using performances which they were able to base their own interpretations on with reasonable success. Generally it is quite difficult to integrate critical views into your writing and engage with them, and build on them so you can work out your own interpretation. This is a skill that candidates need to practise.

AO4

Context does seem to be better addressed and made use of now because it is often more precise. Specific references are made, though there were still general assertions about the 'typical sixteenth century woman' and other such impossibilities. It was worrying to see numbers of centres where the candidates did not know in which century the plays were written so that they would make claims about the 'Elizabethan audience' response to *Macbeth* or *The Tempest*. It would be straightforward to use a simple timeline in order to demonstrate when plays were written. It was impressive, though, when centres had evidently given their candidates very specific sources which they used well.

Examples of candidates' work

An extract from an Explorative Study that explores kingship in Hamlet and The Tempest:

...Caliban, like Hamlet, "lacks advancement" on his island, where he was "first...my own king". He has been subjugated to the will of Prospero, who has usurped him and punished him for speaking his mind. Hamlet is also confined physically by Claudius – unable to return to university – and mentally., ("bounded in a nutshell".) This suppression of Caliban's rights by this absolutist coloniser causes Caliban to rebel against the 'state' by "burning his (Prospero's) books" and attempting to assassinate him. This series of events clearly echoes the Gunpowder Plot (1605). Shakespeare's integration of these highly political events into the play sends a stark message to the audience: absolute rule causes hostility between the masses and the governing body – those who have no power at all will rise up and threaten the state.

Malone observes that Caliban could be seen as a "native Indian" like the people who lived in Virginia before they were repressed by British colonisation (4). Caliban says, referring to the spirits: "They all do hate (Prospero) as rootedly as I." This organic metaphor emphasises that Caliban, a native, has the interests of the islanders at heart because the hate is deep like a root in the soil; as if it is natural for inhabitants to hate colonisers. The metaphor ties Caliban closely to the fabric of the Island, suggesting he would be a more sympathetic ruler than Prospero, though many Elizabethans did not share this view: Cunningham saw Caliban as "blacke, savage, monstrous and rude". (4)

This relationship of usurper and alternative ruler echoes that of Hamlet and Claudius. Caliban's major speeches are in blank verse, a flowing form, highlighting his passion for the island and the emotion he feels for it. He explains how he showed Prospero "all the qualities o'th'isle: the fresh springs, brine pits" etc. just to be imprisoned on a "hard rock". Hamlet, too, says "Denmark's a prison". Caliban wishes that a "a southwest blow on ye [Prospero] and blister you all o'er". These winds would have been known to the Jacobean to consist of damp, infection-bringing air (4). The disease imagery reminds the audience of Hamlet's references to the state as an "ulcerous place."

Shakespeare presents actual and potential rulers and the strategies they use – or could use - to test and warn of their effects on the world. In Hamlet, Shakespeare writes amid uncertainty about Elizabeth I's successor. He shows, terrifyingly, that regicide creates an unhealthy state that must be purged by foreign invasion. In contrast, The Tempest shows how a foreign absolutist ruler shapes a new kingdom in his own image resulting in the suppression of the natives. It was written in the reign of James I who came to rule England from Scotland and whose belief in the divine right of kings sowed the seeds for the Civil War. Clearly the effects on the state of

different kinds of kingship were a major preoccupation of Shakespeare...

Moderator's Comment:

There is a sustained linking of the two plays and references to other critical readings and to relevant contextual issues are fully integrated into the candidate's argument.

Tip:

Notice how exploration of a topic that is reasonably narrow in scope (i.e. 'kingship' rather than, say, 'power') allows the candidate to engage with the text and its contexts in a much more detailed way.

A Creative Critical Response to Love's Labour's Lost

Task: The 2008 Summer / Autumn season at Stratford on Avon has been a disastrous one for the town, with the refurbishment of the theatres (meaning that only the temporary building, The Courtyard, has been open) and resultant demolition and building works spoiling the look of the town centre, especially with the loss of the riverside trees. As a result tourist numbers have declined considerably. This has been exacerbated by the late summer economic downturn.

However, on the bright side, never has "Love's Labour's Lost", the most neglected of Shakespeare's comedies, been so spectacularly popular. David Tennant, the Dr Who star, is playing Berowne, to rave reviews. The stage door has never been busier after the show and the theatre has had to insist that only RSC merchandise can be autographed, not Dr Who paraphernalia.

You are to imagine that Cynthia Sage an (imaginary) columnist in one of the UK's popular papers has taken against this production. In a strongly worded article she has declared that the use of a celebrity television actor is a cheap device to draw the crowds, including armies of Dr Who fans who can have no real interest in Shakespeare, and that this is typical of the "dumbing down of Culture" in today's society. Is nothing sacred? the article asks. Director Gregory Doran, stuck with Shakespeare's worst play and falling Stratford visitors, is scraping the barrel. Stand still and listen, says Cynthia Sage. You can hear Shakespeare turning in his grave.

You are to write the director's response, as it might appear in his blog on the RSC website.

As the director of 'Love's Labour's Lost', I am quite surprised, but rather amused at the negative comments directed at a play that still has a few more weeks to perfect before performed in the RSC at Stratford. I believe everyone has their own views on the result of this play being successful and I would be foolish to ignore the complications created from, what is known as, one of Shakespeare's trickiest plays.

If you have read the play, then I expect you believe that the switch from the book to the play will be ridiculously impossible; performing a play filled with soliloquies to an audience. An example would be in Act

4 Scene 3 where Berowne has a speech which is 70 lines long. In Shakespeare's day, perhaps people were used to long speeches; today they are not. David will have to deal with that. The play has also scarcely any suspense and it is anticlimactic. So, it is impossible to perform without "dumbing down" claims Cynthia Sage in the Daily - . But that is where she is wrong, unclear of the process of translation and the work put in to transform a page from the play onto the stage. Performing a play has a different meaning and different value from its original script. Scholars might be looking at one thing – words on a page. But actors and audiences are looking at something totally different – not just words but actions, sounds and impressions on the stage. I need hardly add that Shakespeare was himself an actor, not an A level candidate. The real effect of Love's Labour's Lost lies in its mixture of ridiculous comedy, silliness and romance, music and song and, in today's theatre, the magic of lighting.

I have received many comments on David Tennant's performance in Love's Labour's Lost but I assure you David is not a newcomer to the theatre, as Cynthia Sage claims ("TV stars just don't work in the legitimate theatre, let alone on Shakespeare's stage") In fact Stratford was the exact place that found his career. His fast witted and entertaining role as Berowne will stun the crowd and leave them wanting more. Yes, there will be many girls there, queuing up for that 'sacred' autograph of his, but let them do so. The theatre welcomes everybody (including those who have no clue on what is happening throughout the performance). You don't have to understand "honorificabilitudinatibus" to get the play.

To hear a journalist mock a play written by one of the most highly accomplished men of English history, gives the impression we are all rather ashamed or plainly embarrassed by Shakespeare's work. Love's Labour's Lost isn't just one of his plays; it's a comedy full of arrogance, pride, power and most importantly, love. We have created a modern and exciting version of what will be a truly successful play and I insist that you all go see it.

Moderator's Comment:

There is a clear sense here of an appreciation of the very different contexts in which the play is written and received and a perceptive exploration of various critical response from audiences. The candidate has been able to adopt and sustain very well the appropriate register, tone and form.

Tip:

Note that the task set is full and detailed, giving both the candidate and the moderator clear guidance as to the intended audience and purpose of the piece. Note also that the task is not included in the word limit.

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